EVERYDAY URBANISM

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INTRODUCTION

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But we are unable to seize the human facts. We fail to see them where they are, namely in humble, familiar, everyday objects. Our search for the human takes us too far, too deep. We seek it in the clouds or in mysteries, whereas it is waiting for us, besieging us on all sides.

—Henri Lefebvre, *The Same and the Other*

What do we mean by everyday urbanism? These two words—one ordinary, the other obscure—together identify a new position in understanding and approaching the city. Rather than urban design, urban planning, urban studies, urban theory, or other specialized terms, urbanism identifies a broad discursive arena that combines all of these disciplines as well as others into a multidimensional consideration of the city. Cities are inexhaustible and contain so many overlapping and contradictory meanings—aesthetic, intellectual, physical, social, political, economic, and experiential—that they can never be reconciled into a single understanding. Urbanism is thus inherently a contested field. The term also carries with it important echoes of the sociologist Louis Wirth's famous essay title and characterization "Urbanism as a Way of Life."[1] This formulation emphasizes the primacy of human experience as the fundamental aspect of any definition of urbanism.

"Everyday" speaks to this element of ordinary human experience and itself conveys many complicated meanings. At a common-sense level, everyday describes the lived experience shared by urban residents, the banal and ordinary routines we know all too well—commuting, working, relaxing, moving through city streets and sidewalks, shopping, buying and eating food, running errands. Even in this descriptive incarnation, the everyday city has rarely been the focus of attention for architects or urban designers, despite the fact that an amazing number of social, spatial, and aesthetic meanings can be found in the repeated activities and conditions that constitute our daily, weekly, and yearly routines. The utterly ordinary reveals a fabric of space and time defined by a complex realm of social practices—a conjuncture of accident, desire, and habit.

The concept of everyday space delineates the physical domain of everyday public activity. Existing in between such defined and physically identifiable realms as the home, the workplace, and the institution, everyday urban space is the connective tissue that binds daily lives together. Everyday space stands in contrast to the carefully planned, officially designated, and often underused public spaces that can be found in most American cities. These monumental spaces only punctuate the larger and more diffuse landscape of everyday life, which tends to be banal and repetitive, everywhere and nowhere, obvious yet invisible. Ambiguous like all in-between spaces, the everyday represents a zone of social transition and possibility with the potential for new social arrangements and forms of imagination.[2]

1 "Urbanism as a Way of Life," first published in 1938, has been extensively reprinted. See Albert J. Reiss, ed., ON CITIES AND SOCIAL LIFE (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938); and Richard Sennett, ed., CLASSIC ESSAYS ON THE CULTURE OF CITIES (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969). For a discussion of other meanings of urbanism, see Nan Ellin, POSTMODERN URBANISM (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1996), 225.

2 For Victor Turner's concept of liminality, "betwixt and between," see THE FOREST OF SYMBOLS

BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND COMMON SENSE

Although the incoherence of everyday space might seem to defeat any conceptual or physical order, the concepts of everyday life as identified by Henri Lefebvre, Guy Debord, and Michel de Certeau serve as an introduction to this rich repository of urban meaning. These three French theorists, all of whom died in the last decade, were, respectively, a Marxist philosopher and sociologist, a filmmaker and would-be revolutionary, and an anthropologist and historian. Pioneers in investigating the completely ignored spheres of daily existence, their work identified the everyday as a crucial arena of modern culture and society. While acknowledging the oppression of daily life, each discovered its potential as a site of creative resistance and liberatory power. In contrast to the French theorists such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, who dominated academic and architectural discourse over the last two decades, Lefebvre, Debord, and de Certeau insisted on the connection between theory and social practices, between thought and lived experience. Lefebvre pointed out that "when the philosopher turns back towards real life, general concepts which have been worked out by means of a highly specialized activity and abstracted from everyday life are not lost. On the contrary, they take on a new meaning for lived experience."[3] All of the authors included in this book share with these three philosophical predecessors similar assumptions about everyday life.

The belief that everyday life is important governs our work. Lefebvre was the first philosopher to insist that the apparently trivial everyday actually constitutes the basis of all social experience and the true realm of political contestation. Lefebvre described daily life as the "screen on which society projects its light and its shadow, its hollows and its planes, its power and its weakness."[4] In spite of this significance, Lefebvre warns, the everyday is difficult to decode due to its fundamental ambiguity. As the first step in analyzing this slippery concept, Lefebvre distinguished between two simultaneous realities that exist within everyday life: the *quotidian*, the timeless, humble, repetitive natural rhythms of life; and the *modern*, the always new and constantly changing habits that are shaped by technology and worldliness.[5] Lefebvre structured his analysis of everyday life around this duality, looking past potentially alienating aspects in an effort to unearth the deeply human elements that still exist within the everyday. While most urbanists influenced by Lefebvre have critiqued modernity's negative effects on the city,[6] we have tried optimistically to focus on the other side of the equation—the possibility of reclaiming elements of the quotidian that have been hidden in the nooks and crannies of the urban environment. We have discovered these qualities in overlooked, marginal places, from streets and sidewalks to vacant lots and parks, from suburbia to the inner city.

We believe that lived experience should be more important than physical form in defining the city. This perspective distinguishes us from many designers and critics who point to the visual incoherence of everyday space as exemplifying everything that is wrong with American cities. Like Lefebvre, Debord, and de Certeau, we understand urbanism to be a human and social discourse. The city is, above all, a social product, created out of the demands of everyday use and the social struggles of urban inhabitants. Design within everyday space must start with an understanding and acceptance of the life that takes place there. This goes against the grain of professional design discourse, which is based on abstract principles, whether quantitative, formal, spatial, or perceptual. Whatever the intention, professional abstractions inevitably produce spaces that have little to do with real

(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–110. Also see Donald Weber on the related concept of "border," in "From Limen to Border: A Meditation on the Legacy of Victor Turner for American Cultural Studies," AMERICAN QUARTERLY 47 (September 1995): 525–37.

3 Henri Lefebvre, CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE (London: Verso, 1991), 95.

4 Lefebvre, CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE, 18.

5 Henri Lefebvre, EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD (New York: Harper, 1971), 25.

6 See, for example, Kristen Ross, FAST CARS AND CLEAN BODIES (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Edward Soja, POSTMODERN GEOGRAPHIES (London: Verso, 1989), and THIRDSPACE: JOURNEYS TO LOS ANGELES AND OTHER REAL AND IMAGINED PLACES (New York: Blackwell, 1996); and Mark Gottdeiner, THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF URBAN SPACE (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985).

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human impulses. We agree with Raymond Ledrut's conclusion "The problem today—which has nothing 'philosophical' about it—is that of the real life 'of' the city and 'in' the city. The true issue is not to make beautiful cities or well-managed cities, it is to make a work of life. The rest is a by-product."[7]

For us, the play of difference is the primary element in the "real life" of the city. Lefebvre observed that abstract urban spaces, primarily designed to be reproduced, "negated all differences, those that come from nature and history as well as those that come from the body, ages, sexes, and ethnicities."[8] This is visible everywhere in increasingly generic yet specialized spaces that parcel daily experience into separate domains. Though difference is progressively negated in urban space, however, it nonetheless remains the most salient fact of everyday life. Its burdens and pleasures are distributed unevenly, according to class, age, race, and gender. Lefebvre focused particular attention on the victims of everyday life, especially women sentenced to endless routines of housework and shopping. Lefebvre also identified immigrants, low-level employees, and teenagers as victims of everyday life, although "never in the same way, never at the same time, never all at once."[9]

To locate these differences physically in everyday lives is to map the social geography of the city. The city of the bus rider or pedestrian does not resemble that of the automobile owner. A shopping cart means very different things to a busy mother in a supermarket and a homeless person on the sidewalk. These differences separate the lives of urban inhabitants from one another, while their overlap constitutes the primary form of social exchange in the city. The intersections between an individual or defined group and the rest of the city are everyday space—the site of multiple social and economic transactions, where multiple experiences accumulate in a single location. These places where differences collide or interact are the most potent sites for everyday urbanism.

The goal of everyday urbanism is to orchestrate what the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called "dialogism." A mode of textual analysis, dialogism can easily be applied to design practices. Bakhtin defined dialogism as the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by "heteroglossia" —the constant interaction between meanings, all of which can potentially influence the others. "Dialogization" occurs when a word, discourse, language, or culture becomes relativized, deprivileged, and aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language remains authoritarian or absolute.[10] To dialogize design in the city challenges the conceptual hierarchy under which most design professionals operate. Everyday life provides a good starting point for this shift because it is grounded in the commonplace rather than the canonical, the many rather than the few, and the repeated rather than the unique; and it is uniquely comprehensible to ordinary people.

Not surprisingly, since everyone is potentially an expert on everyday life, everyday life has never been of much interest to experts. Lefebvre pointed out that although experts and intellectuals are embedded in everyday life, they prefer to think of themselves as outside and elsewhere. Convinced that everyday life is trivial, they attempt to evade it. They use rhetoric and metalanguage as "permanent substitutes for experience, allowing them to ignore the mediocrity of their own condition."[11] Lefebvre also described the purpose of such distancing techniques: "Abstract culture places an almost opaque screen (if it were completely opaque the situation would be simpler) between cultivated [people] and everyday life. Abstract culture not only supplies them with words and ideas but also with an attitude which forces them to seek the 'meaning' of their lives and consciousness outside of themselves and their real relations with the world."[12]

7 Raymond Ledrut, "Speech and the Silence of the City," in THE CITY AND THE SIGN: AN INTRODUCTION TO URBAN SEMIOTICS, ed. Mark Gottdeiner and Alexandros Langopoulos (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 133.

8 Henri Lefebvre, "Space: Social Product and Use Value," in CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY: EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES, ed. J. W. Freiberg (New York: Irvington, 1979), 289.

9 Lefebvre, CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE, 127.

10 Mikhail Bakhtin, THE DIALOGIC IMAGINATION: FOUR ESSAYS, ed. Michael Holmquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 426–27.

11 Lefebvre, EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD, 92.

12 Lefebvre, CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE, 238.

To avoid this breach with reality, everyday urbanism demands a radical repositioning of the designer, a shifting of power from the professional expert to the ordinary person. Widespread expertise in everyday life acts as a leveling agent, eliminating the distance between professionals and users, between specialized knowledge and daily experience. The designer is immersed within contemporary society rather than superior to and outside it, and is thus forced to address the contradictions of social life from close up.

TIME AND SPACE

Both Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre argued that the temporal is as significant as the spatial in everyday life. De Certeau drew a distinction between two modes of operation: strategies, based on place, and tactics, based on time. Strategies represent the practices of those in power, postulating "a place that can be delimited as its own and serve as the base from which relations with an exteriority composed of targets or threats can be managed." Strategies establish a "proper" place, either spatial or institutional, such that place triumphs over time. Political, economic, and scientific rationalities are constructed on the strategic model. In contrast, a tactic is a way of operating without a proper place, and so depends on time. As a result, tactics lack the borders necessary for designation as visible totalities: "The place of a tactic belongs to the other." Tactics are the "art of the weak," incursions into the field of the powerful. Without a proper place, tactics rely on seized opportunities, on cleverly chosen moments, and on the rapidity of movements that can change the organization of a space. Tactics are a form of everyday creativity. Many of the urban activities we describe are tactical. By challenging the "proper" places of the city, this range of transitory, temporary, and ephemeral urban activities constitutes counterpractices to officially sanctioned urbanisms.

Lefebvre also identified another set of multiple temporalities composing urban life. Everyday time is located at the intersection of two contrasting but coexisting modes of repetition, the cyclical and the linear. The cyclical consists of the rhythms of nature: night and day, changing seasons, birth and death. Rational processes define linear patterns, time measured into quantifiable schedules of work and leisure with such units as timetables, fast food, coffee breaks, and prime time. Repeated across days, weeks, months, years, and lifetimes, these competing rhythms shape our lived experience. More important to Lefebvre than these predictable oscillations, however, is a third category of time, the discontinuous and spontaneous moments that punctuate daily experience—fleeting sensations of love, play, rest, knowledge. These instants of rupture and illumination, arising from everyone's daily existence, reveal the possibilities and limitations of life.[13] They highlight the distance between what life is and what it might be. Although these moments quickly pass into oblivion, they provide the key to the powers contained in the everyday and function as starting points for social change. Guy Debord saw them as potential revolutions in individual everyday life, springboards for the realization of the possible.[14] By recognizing and building on these understandings of time, we can explore new and barely acknowledged realms of urban experience.

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Henri Lefebvre, LA SOMME ET LE RESTE, VOL. 2 (Paris: La Nef de Paris, 1959), discussed in David Harvey, "Afterword" in Henri Lefebvre, THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE (New York: Blackwell, 1991), 429.

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Guy Debord, "Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation," in Ken Knabb, SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL ANTHOLOGY (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 43–45.

THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Like these writers, we want to draw attention to the transformational possibilities of the everyday. Alice Kaplan and Kristen Ross have pointed out that the political is hidden within the contradictions and possibilities of lived experience.[15] The most banal and repetitive gestures of everyday life give rise to desires that cannot be satisfied there. If these desires could acquire a political language, they would make a new set of personal and collective demands on the social order. Therefore the practices of everyday urbanism should inevitably lead to social change, not via abstract political ideologies imposed from outside, but instead through specific concerns that arise from the lived experience of different individuals and groups in the city.

While acknowledging our debts to Lefebvre and Debord, the general position of writers included in this book is not identical to theirs. Both Lefebvre and Debord identified the urban environment as a unique site for contesting the alienation of modern capitalist society and believed that this alienation could be overcome, thus rendering individuals whole once again. They saw both the society they attacked and the future society they desired as totalities.[16] We instead acknowledge fragmentation and incompleteness as inevitable conditions of postmodern life. We do not seek overarching solutions. There is no universal everyday urbanism, only a multiplicity of responses to specific times and places. Our solutions are modest and small in scale—micro-utopias, perhaps, contained in a sidewalk, a bus bench, or a minipark. In a rare nontotalizing moment, Debord declared that "One day, we will construct cities for drifting . . . but, with light retouching, one can utilize certain zones which already exist. One can utilize certain persons who already exist."[17] One purpose of this book is to identify a few of those zones and a few of those persons.

TOWARD EVERYDAY URBANISM

The possibility that the concept of everyday urbanism might interest a broader audience first became apparent to the editors in 1994, when we organized a symposium as part of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art's "Urban Revisions" exhibition. From this symposium we began to assemble the book, which took shape slowly through heated but always stimulating discussions, our attempts to delineate the amorphous contours of everyday life. This project is the product of our friendship; each of us brought different interests, perspectives, and knowledge to this collaborative endeavor. We discovered around us other writers, photographers, and architects working with similar ideas. Though much of the work described here takes place in Los Angeles, we hope that the relevance of these ideas and activities extends into the general realm of the urban. We suspect that this book represents only a small glimpse at everyday urbanism, and that multiple versions already exist across the country, ripe for further examination.[18]

The book is divided into two sections, "Looking at the City" and "Making the City." The first group of essays examines a range of existing activities and places around Los Angeles and New York. Sanctioned yet unofficial, highly visible but hidden, these underexplored places have important things to say. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes street activities in New York City, from parades to children at play, and argues that such vernacular performances constitute a type of architecture because they give form to urban space. In new kinds of public spaces that are produced by such everyday activities as garage sales and street vending in Los Angeles, I see multiple publics asserting

15 Alice Kaplan and Kristen Ross, introduction to "Everyday Life" issue of YALE FRENCH STUDIES 73 (Fall 1987): 4.

16 For further discussions of the concept of totality see Martin Jay, MARXISM AND TOTALITY: THE ADVENTURES OF A CONCEPT FROM LUKAS TO HABERMAS (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 276-99; and Peter Wollen, "Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International," in ON THE PASSAGE OF A FEW PEOPLE THROUGH A BRIEF MOMENT IN TIME, ed. Elizabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

17 Guy Debord, "La Théorie de la dérive," in LES LEVRES NUES 9 (November 1956): 10.

18 See, for example, Deborah Berke and Steven Harris, eds., ARCHITECTURE OF THE EVERYDAY (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).

their identities and delineating new urban arenas for political action. Mona Houghton describes a very different social context in Los Angeles, the bohemian enclave of Laurel Canyon, where Ernest Rosenthal, scavenger and recycler, tends his continuously evolving garden. Too sophisticated to be an outsider but more obsessed than the typical home gardener, Rosenthal challenges distinctions between high and low. Dennis Keeley's photo essay reveals the beauty and humor of Rosenthal's garden. John Chase focuses on his own Southern California neighborhood, Venice, to analyze trash as a mode of urban information and communication, a medium through which urban residents understand and attempt to control their environment. Finally, Camilo José Vergara's portfolio of photographs surveys economic activities in South Central Los Angeles, documenting the ways in which Hispanic immigrants transform their public environment, visible on streets and fences as well as in garages and yards.

The second half of the book looks at design activities, professionals collaborating in building the everyday city. John Kaliski provides theoretical context by tracing the history of everyday urbanism within the postmodern discourse of urban design. Urban designers, argues Kaliski, have consistently evaded the realities of existing urban life, by attempting either to recover the past or to control the future. He proposes everyday urbanism as an alternative to the failure of the abstract modernist city. In the next two essays, John Chase and Phoebe Wall Wilson present small-scale projects that respond practically to daily life in two very different Los Angeles municipalities, West Hollywood and Pasadena. Both projects retrofit single-use environments with multiple functions and amenities to encourage spontaneous social interaction. Both projects, conceived within existing planning and regulatory frameworks, are very likely to be implemented. Norman Millar describes the satisfactions and frustrations of his ongoing work with Central American street vendors in MacArthur Park. The relationship between the professional designers, the vendors, and the city is intermittent and rarely conclusive, challenging existing modes of architectural practice. Walter Hood uses an improvisatory method to re-create conceptually a minipark and its surrounding streets in West Oakland. Hood imagines responses to the multiple needs of the entire neighborhood, redesigning the park to accommodate beer drinkers, recyclers, and prostitutes as well as gardeners and children.

In spite of its detailed discussion of theoretical influences, this book was written not as a scholarly or critical work but primarily as a call to action. Unifying the ideas and practices of everyday urbanism presented here is the hope that all might serve as entry points for an understanding of everyday space and as incentives for rethinking the ways in which designers can operate there. Proposing alternatives to the limited scope and methods of contemporary urban design, these essays attempt to reconnect design to human, social, and political concerns without repeating the narrow, deterministic approaches of the social and advocacy architecture movements of the 1960s. Instead, everyday urbanism seeks to release the powers of creativity and imagination already present within daily life as the means of transforming urban experience and the city.

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